



ALL OUR KIN INC.

A SAFE AND LOVING PLACE WHERE PARENTS AND CHILDREN CAN LEARN

February 28, 2014

Dear Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann, and Esteemed Members of the Education Committee:

My name is Rachel Wilf, and I am a Policy Fellow at All Our Kin, a nationally-recognized, Connecticut-based nonprofit. All Our Kin trains, supports, and sustains family child care providers to ensure that children and families have the foundation they need to succeed in school and in life. We work directly with over 250 parents and educators, serving over 1,200 children, in greater New Haven, greater Bridgeport, and Norwalk. I am here today to testify in support of Senate Bill 25, "An Act Establishing an Office of Early Childhood."

We believe that the Office of Early Childhood is the most effective mechanism for creating a system that ensures quality in all child care settings and provides information and access for all of Connecticut's families. Prior to last year's Executive Order creating the Office of Early Childhood, families and providers alike were forced to navigate a fragmented and confusing network of programs and services for young children. Although the Office of Early Childhood has begun the systems-level changes required to streamline and bring transparency to our state's early childhood systems, much work remains.

At All Our Kin, we see firsthand the difficulties families face as they search for affordable, accessible, quality child care options. Parents report that the state's early childhood system is confusing and overwhelming; they tell us that they do not know where to go to get the information that they need, and that they become discouraged and exhausted in their attempts to navigate the current, fragmented system.

We also see the need for a unified system for providers, specifically family child care providers. Too often, family child care providers are forgotten or left out of professional development opportunities and funding streams that can raise the quality of their work. Yet family child care providers play a crucial role in our state as caregivers of Connecticut's youngest and most vulnerable children. Our state faces an acute shortage of quality child care for infants and toddlers—and this shortage especially affects low-income families. In these conditions of scarcity, family child care providers, both licensed and unlicensed, play a crucial role as the teachers of our youngest and most vulnerable children. Family child care programs are essential to meeting the need for infant and toddler care, as well as the need for affordable, second- and third- shift, and culturally diverse care.


When providers are unable to give children high-quality early learning experiences—because of lack of education and training, insufficient resources, isolation, and high stress levels—children begin at a disadvantage, and their development is delayed. In the words of Harvard's Center for the Developing Child, "Early experiences determine whether a child's brain architecture will provide a strong or weak foundation for all future learning, behavior, and health."

At All Our Kin, we have demonstrated that with sufficient investment, incentives, and support, family child care programs can meet high levels of quality. However, for providers to meet the levels of quality that all Connecticut's children deserve, we must create an early childhood system in which these essential caregivers are included as full participants, a system that recognizes and rewards them for excellence, offers incentives for professional development, and holds them to high quality standards.

We believe that the Office of Early Childhood is ideally situated to lead our state toward creating such a system. In the past six months, the Office has already begun to shape statewide conversations on how best to improve outcomes for children. In the future, we expect that the Office will take the lead on issues including licensing and professional development for providers, family engagement, the creation of early screening and referral systems, and coordination of data collection. These steps are essential if we are to create a comprehensive, coordinated system of programs and services that will provide for all of Connecticut's children.

We applaud the state of Connecticut for recognizing the need to coordinate our state's early childhood programs and services. We believe that the establishment of the Office of Early Childhood is crucial to the well-being of children, families, and child care providers across Connecticut. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Rachel Wilf".

Rachel Wilf
Policy Fellow
All Our Kin, Inc.